



# Marine Environmental Research Institute

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## **Department of Interior Taps Marine Toxicologist for Gulf Spill Working Group**

Some of America's leading scientists have stepped up to bat for the Gulf of Mexico. In May, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar established the Strategic Sciences Working Group (SSWG), a unique cross disciplinary working group comprised of 14 scientists with the power to influence the highest levels of government. One recent addition to this team is marine toxicologist, Dr. Susan Shaw. She is the director of the Marine Environmental Research Institute.

An outspoken and influential voice on ocean pollution, Dr. Shaw has spent the past two decades documenting the effects of hundreds of man-made chemicals on marine ecosystems. She was the first toxicologist to experience the oil spill firsthand, diving into the murky mix of dispersants and oil in Gulf waters. Her observations were published in a New York Times Op-Editorial "Swimming Through the Spill". In July, Shaw authored a Scientists' Consensus Statement objecting to the use of dispersants in the Gulf, which was signed by many prominent ocean scientists.

Now that the Deepwater Horizon well has been permanently capped, anxious inhabitants of the Gulf Coast face a looming question: what will be the long-term impacts on the health and livelihood of their region? For the first time, an independent group of scientists is being asked to directly advise government policy during an ongoing environmental disaster. The SSWG is charged with the complex job of assessing the consequences of the spill and recommending policy actions and interventions to reduce health, environmental, and socio-economic stresses in the Gulf.

In May, the SSWG conducted a rapid scientific assessment of the spill's potential consequences. In September, the group convened in New Orleans to go a step further and provide policymakers with the information they need to accelerate the region's recovery.

Of major concern is the chain of consequences resulting from the application of nearly 2 million gallons of chemical dispersants in a deepwater system. One consequence was the formation of large plumes of dispersed oil in the water column, posing a health threat to some 15,000 marine species residing in and migrating through Gulf waters. "Dispersed oil has been found feet thick on the seafloor," says Shaw. "In marine sediments, this oil will not degrade for decades and can be re-released by storm events. Exposure to the toxic hydrocarbons in oil will be an ongoing health concern for many years."

The group has relied on Shaw's expertise to understand the spill's health impacts on wildlife and people. "There is no safe level for exposure to carcinogenic, mutagenic chemicals in oil," according to Shaw. "Because of the massive dispersant use, there are huge residual stores of bioavailable oil and hydrocarbons in the system."

Due to closures and restricted access to impacted areas, little independent research has been conducted so far. By collaborating with the Gulf Restoration Network and other local groups, MERI's Gulf EcoTox Project (GET) was able to obtain more than 150 samples across the region - from water to phytoplankton, shellfish and fish. Shaw says, "It was critical that we were able to get into these areas and collect samples during the time of highest exposure." Now MERI and its partners are seeking funds to analyze their samples and expand the project.

The Marine Environmental Research Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting the marine environment and human health through scientific research and education. For information about the GET Project and other programs, please visit MERI online at [www.meriresearch.org](http://www.meriresearch.org).